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# *Per Ovidio parla Amore, sì come se fosse persona umana (V.N. XXV): The case for Ovid's figure of Amore in Dante's Vita Nuova*

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The *aetas Ovidiana*, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was the period in the Middle Ages when Ovid's works were most widely studied. Ovid was seen as the "love poet," the foremost literary authority on the subject of love. Medieval authors took two different approaches to Ovid's love poems: reading them either completely outside of the context of Christian love, or viewing them within the context of Christian love. In the latter case, medieval authors either interpreted Ovid's stories allegorically in light of Christian truth or used them to create a parody of Christian values. Those that tried to reconcile Ovid's physical love with Christian spiritual love favored the *Remedia* over the *Ars* because it is in the *Remedia* that the *praeceptor* denounces physical love.

Dante was one of those medieval authors who attempted to reconcile the Ovidian erotic within a divine Christian context. Dante's approach, however, differed from that of his contemporaries; instead of rejecting Ovidian physical love, he remotivates it in the context of Christian love. Dante makes Ovid's amatory poems critical to his exposition of his conception of spiritual love and especially to his incarnational poetics. In this way, he indicates that Ovidian erotic play, while valid, has a limited horizon because it does not involve spiritual transcendence. While many of his contemporaries ultimately rejected the erotic in favor of the spiritual, Dante made the erotic an integral part of divine love. The merely erotic is surpassed but the Ovidian erotic world is recuperated and remotivated in a different direction.

Dante scholars have widely agreed that major Ovid (the *Metamorphoses*) played a large role in shaping Dante's imagery in the *Commedia*. Some scholars have also considered the influence of minor Ovid (*Ars*,

*Remedia, Amores, Heroides* and *Fasti*) on the *Commedia*. To date, however, no one has thoroughly considered the presence of minor Ovid in the *Vita Nuova*, where Dante conspicuously calls attention to it.

Critical treatment of Dante's characterization of Amore in the *Vita Nuova* has been especially limited. Dante's own explanation of his character Amore in chapter XXV, in particular, has received insufficient attention. Dante scholars have usually interpreted this explanation as a recantation of a banal trope or as a digressionary attempt to reaffirm Dante's poetic allegiance to Guido.<sup>1</sup> In dismissing this explanation, they have not considered the personification of Amore throughout the *Vita Nuova* in light of Dante's own definition of Amore. Significantly, they have not considered Amore as a consistent presence, concentrating instead only on his four main appearances in the text.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, despite the fact that Dante informs his readers that Ovid's Amor is his model, critics have largely ignored this model, choosing instead to compare Dante's Amore to the Troubadour Love or to Cavalcanti's and Guinizelli's Love.<sup>3</sup> Finally, believing that Dante's justification of his use of Amore actually constitutes a recantation of this use, critics have contended that Amore no longer figures in the narrative after chapter XXV, since he is incompatible with Christian love.

Dante's assertion that Ovid's Amor was the model for his Amore has been readily dismissed by critics because of Dante's own inconsistencies in his presentation of this figure.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the narrative, Amore is portrayed as a predominantly Ovidian figure who sometimes exhibits characteristics of the figures of Love found in the works of Cavalcanti, Guinizelli, the Sicilian poets, the stilnovo poets, the Troubadours, Capellanus, and even Propertius.<sup>5</sup> In addition, he is sometimes endowed with characteristics of Boethius' figure of Philosophy and of the Christian God.<sup>6</sup>

Though it is clear that Dante blended elements of Ovid's Amor with elements of many other literary figures of Love, it is important not to discount or downplay Dante's extensive borrowing from Ovid's Amor. In light of the fact that Dante most consistently imbues his figure of Amore with elements of Ovid's Amor and he calls attention to his Ovidian model in chapter XXV, this essay proposes a thorough consideration of Dante's adaptation of Ovid's Amor in the *Vita Nuova*. The essay will offer an interpretation of Dante's figure of Amore in the *Vita Nuova* as a rewritten Ovidian Amor, demonstrating that chapter XXV is not a digression but rather is central, written with the purpose of clarifying

and emphasizing Amore's importance; that Dante presents primarily an Ovidian Amor, not a Troubadour, Cavalcantian or Guinizellian version of Love; that Amore is a consistent presence who plays a key role in the course of Dante's love for Beatrice; and that Amore, who constitutes an integral part of Dante's theology of love, does not disappear in the presence of Christian love. In order to focus on the Ovidian male lover's perspective in this essay, the corpus of minor Ovid will be restricted to the *Amores*, *Ars*, and *Remedia*.<sup>7</sup>

In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante presents a central character from minor Ovid, Amor, as an integral part of the narrative; this presentation is unlike his use of major and minor Ovidian characters in the *Commedia*, where Dante either mentions or compares himself as protagonist to Ovidian characters but they do not act as characters on their own. The presentation of Ovid's Amor in the *Vita Nuova* is Dante's most extensive use of any major or minor Ovidian character in all of his works. Ovid's Amor is not just a character whom Dante meets on his journey and whose story he hears; he is not merely an exemplum offered in the context of Christian redemption; and he is not a character to be compared to Dante himself. Instead Ovid's Amor actually interacts with Dante-protagonist, not to tell a story, but to play a crucial role in Dante's own spiritual development. Amore acts as a spiritual guide in the art of love, inspiring Dante to love Beatrice, who, in the *Commedia*, inspires Dante to the love of the Christian god.

Throughout most of the *Vita Nuova* the figure of Amore engages in discourse with Dante-protagonist. In chapter XXV, however, Dante steps back from his role as protagonist in the narrative and analyzes the figure of Amore. He defines love as an accident of substance and explains how he presents Amore as a rhetorical figure in the narrative. He defines specific characteristics of this figure: Amore is a man whom Dante sees in motion, laughing, and speaking. He cites Ovid as an exemplum of the use of this rhetorical figure and justifies his own similar use of Amore by arguing that poetic license allows modern authors to personify Amore provided that they present a true meaning underneath the rhetorical ornament. In light of the ambiguity surrounding Dante's presentation of Amore throughout the narrative, chapter XXV is quite clarifying and offers a framework with which to view the figure of Amore.

AMORE AS A PERSONIFICATION: A MAN IN MOTION, LAUGHING  
AND SPEAKING

In chapter XXV, Dante describes Amore as a man. This is exactly how he portrays Amore throughout the narrative; at various points in the *Vita Nuova*, Amore takes on bodies ranging from that of a post-pubescent young man with god-like attributes, to that of a humbly-dressed traveler. The problem, however, is that Amore also appears as a figure within Dante's heart and mind. While this kind of personification at first would seem highly inconsistent, it is not so if considered in light of its model. Ovid's Amor is a physical god in his own right who stands at the lover's side, but also lodges in the lover's heart, mind and spirit.

In the first book of the *Amores*, Ovid describes Amor as an independent figure who stands by Ovid's side:

Solus eram, si non saeuus adesset Amor;  
Hunc ego, si cupiam, nusquam dimittere possum:  
Ante uel a membris diuidar ipse meis.  
Ergo Amor et modicum circa mea tempora uinum  
Mecum est et madidis lapsa corona comis.

(Am. I.VI.34-37, Save for implacable love, I am completely alone.  
And even though I should wish, I cannot give him dismissal,  
That would tear from my side part of my actual self.  
Love for an escort, and wine, a little, to give me some courage,  
I with my chaplet askew - what do you think I can do?)\*

In chapter XXXI of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante also describes Amore as an independent figure who stands by him, in this instance supporting him as he mourns Beatrice's death:

Che si n'è gita in ciel subitamente,  
E ha lasciato Amor meco dolente.

(V.N. XXXI, To Heaven she has suddenly departed,  
And here are Love and I left broken-hearted.)<sup>9</sup>

Both poems lament a separation between the lover and the beloved, with Love accompanying the lover. One couple (Ovid and his mistress) is separated by a door; the other couple (Dante and Beatrice) is separated by death.

Later in the *Amores*, Ovid complains that Amor is an idle and worthless lodger in his heart:

O numquam pro me satis indignate Amoro.  
O in corde meo desidioso puer,

(Am. II.9, Amor, no words can match my indignation-  
Boy lounging in my heart as days go by.)<sup>10</sup>

In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante also depicts Amore in his heart, yet this time Amor is welcome in it. In chapter XXVII, for example, Dante says that he has become accustomed to Amore's presence in his heart since it has been so prolonged:

Sì lungiamente m'ha tenuto Amore  
E costumato a la sua segnorìa,  
che sì com'elli m'era forte in pria,  
così mi sta soave ora nel core.

(V.N. XXVII, So long have I been subject to Love's sway/  
And grown accustomed to his mastery/That where at first  
his rule seemed harsh to me/Sweet is his presence in my  
heart today.)

Instead of resenting Amore's reign, as Ovid does, Dante appreciates it. While he initially views this reign as "forte," he ultimately decides it is "soave."

Ovid's Amor and Dante's Amore reside not only in the heart, but also in the mind and spirit of the lover. In the *Remedia*, Ovid warns that Amor attacks the mind and creeps into the defenseless spirit:

Eripiunt omnes animo sine uulnere neruos:  
Adfluit incautis insidiosus Amor

(Rem. 147-8, These can exhaust the nerves and leave the  
spirit defenseless,  
Where the way is prepared, Love comes stealthily in.)<sup>11</sup>

In *Vita Nuova* XI, Dante rewrites Ovid's image of Amor entering his body stealthily: Dante's "corrected" Amore remains in the place of the evil "spirits of vision" within Dante's head which have been driven away. Like Ovid's body, Dante's body is overtaken by Amore; Ovid's nerves are exhausted and Dante's body is heavy and inanimate:

Ma elli quasi per soverchio di dolcezza divenia tale, che lo mio corpo,  
lo quale era tutto allora sotto lo suo reggimento, molte volte si  
movea come cosa grave inanimata.

(V.N. XI, But, almost by excess of sweetness, his influence was such  
that my body,  
which was then utterly given over to his governance, often  
moved like a heavy, inanimate object.)

Both Amors have complete control; the reign of Dante's Amore is, of course, sweet.

Both Ovid and Dante touch on the notion of driving away the spirits or figures that take over their bodies. Ovid discusses ways to drive away Amor; Dante describes Amore's acts of driving away evil spirits from his body. Ovid advises that the lover may rid himself of Amor by soothing his mind and spirit with other things:

cum semel haec animum coepit mulcere uoluptas,  
debilibus pinnis irritus exit Amor.

(Rem. 197-8, Once these pleasures begin to soothe the  
mind and the spirit,  
Love, on ridiculous wing, flutters defeated away.)<sup>12</sup>

Later in the *Remedia*, Ovid warns that since Amor comes into the mind by habit, he may also be expelled by habit: "intra amor mentes usu, dediscitur usu" (Rem. 503, Love comes into the mind by habit, and habit expels it).<sup>13</sup>

Dante does not wish to rid himself of Amore. Amore, in fact, rids Dante's mind of evil spirits, such as seen in chapter XI. In chapter XXXIV, meanwhile, Amore, dwelling within Dante's heart, attacks Dante's mind to rid it of the sorrowful thoughts of the departed lady:

Amor, che ne la mente la sentia,  
 s'era svegliato nel destrutto core,  
 e diceva a' sospiri, "Andate fore";  
 per che ciascun dolente si partia.

(V.N. XXXIV, Love felt her presence in my mind as he  
 Within my ravaged heart began to move,  
 And, saying to my sighs, 'Go forth!', he drove  
 Them hence and they departed dismally.)

Although both figures of Love appear in the lover's heart and mind, they are still literal figures rather than a psychological force. Dante conveys this in chapter XXV by emphasizing the physicality of Amore; Amore is a character in motion, who speaks and laughs. While most critics contend that Amore as a figure disappears after chapter XXV, he actually still appears as a literal figure after this chapter, according to Dante's definition. In the above quoted passage from chapter XXXIV, for example, Amore, as a literal figure, is still speaking. In the poem of chapter XXXIX, meanwhile, Dante asserts that Amore not only dwells within his heart, but literally feels the pain of his heart:

Questi pensieri, e li sospir ch'eo gitto,  
 diventan ne lo cor sì angosciosi,  
 ch'Amor vi tramortisce, sì lien dole;

(V.N. XXXIX, These thoughts of mine and sighs which  
 forth I send  
 Within my heart to sharper anguish grow,  
 Where Love in mortal pallor lies in pain;)

In this passage, Dante's Amore is wounded by Dante's thoughts which are thrown like arrows. Amore's physical pain may be intended to echo the physical pain of Ovid's Amor who is wounded by his own arrows:

Saucius ingemuit telumque uolatile sensit  
 et pars spectati muneris ipse fuit.

(A.A. I. 169-70, Wounded himself, he groans to feel the shaft  
 of the arrow:  
 He is a victim himself, no more spectator, but show.)



The literalness of the figure of Amore in the *Vita Nuova* is problematic for Dante. Dante's Amore must be a consistent presence, yet he may not be real. Dante's claim to the historical veracity of his text is problematic in determining the status of Amore: the solution Dante chooses is to present Amore as a character only in dreams and visions.<sup>14</sup> In Ovid's amatory works, in contrast to the situation of Amore in Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Amor is an accepted fiction and so does not need to be transposed into an explicitly imaginary realm. Ovid's readers understand his semi-ironic presentation of Amor in the *Ars* as, literally, a child in need of instruction. In the *Remedia*, however, Ovid explicitly says in the frame for Amor's speech that this speech may have occurred in a dream, and that, in fact, the speaker may not be the real Amor. At the very end Ovid toys with the reader, asking himself whether Amor's speech really was a dream:

Is mihi sic dixit (dubito uerusne Amoro  
 An somnus fuerit; sed, puto, somnus erat):  
 .....  
 plura loquebatur; placidum puerilis imago  
 destituit somnum, si modo somnus erat.

(Rem. 555-6, 575-6, He was speaking to me - I doubt if it really was Amor./ Hallucination or dream, probably only a dream . . . He had more to say, it seemed, but he faded and vanished./Less than the shade of a boy, gone like a ghost from my dream, as if it was a dream.)<sup>15</sup>

Dante uses the same device that Ovid uses in the *Remedia* when Amore appears. In chapter XII, for example, Dante says:

Avvenne quasi nel mezzo de lo mio dormire che me parve vedere  
 ne la mia camera lungo me sedere uno giovane vestito di  
 bianchissime vestimenta” (italics mine)

(V.N. XII, About half-way through my sleep I seemed to see beside me in my room a young man dressed in whitest garments)

The word “parere” that Dante uses in this phrase adds an extra element

of doubt as to Amore's veracity. Dante uses this word often with regard to Amore. While the reader might not believe that Amore is a real creature, it is plausible that Dante might dream or imagine that he sees Amore.<sup>16</sup>

As a personification, Amore is Ovid's Amor but "corrected" in two key aspects: he is a man, not a boy; and he speaks and laughs for opposite reasons as compared to Ovid's Amor. While Ovid presents Amor as a boy, "puer," Dante presents Amore as a young man, "giovane," and himself as a 9-year old boy at the start of his relationship with Beatrice. The key distinction between Ovid's Amor and Dante's Amore is that Amore has already gone through puberty. Ovid's Amor, as a boy, is not sexually active, and so does not understand the implications of the relationships of mortals that he initiates. In contrast, Dante's Amore, as a young man, may be sexually active, understands the implications of an amorous affair, and so wittingly encourages Dante to pursue a relationship beyond the physical.

The difference between the boy, Amor, and the man, Amore, is reflected in the difference between the Amor-Ovid and Amore-Dante relationship. Dante's Amore is not cruel and he is not capricious. He is not a fickle child, but rather a responsible adult. The fact that he is an adult and that he has Reason on his side makes him more credible as, and more worthy to be, a guide.<sup>17</sup> Because Dante presents Amore as a guide, the master-slave relationship between Amor and Ovid becomes a teacher-student relationship between Amore and Dante. Amor does not hinder Dante (as he hinders Ovid in the *Ars* and *Amores*), but helps. Unique to the *Ars* is a tension and contrast in Ovid's presentation of Amor which opens the way for Dante to make such a change in the nature of his Amor, Amore. Ovid suggests that Amor is a young, malleable boy, who may someday grow up, and, in maturing, may change. The change in Amor, Ovid predicts, will be favorable to Ovid because Amor will eventually submit to him. Ultimately, Ovid not only forces Amor to submit, but he avenges the wounds administered by Amor, and takes complete control of Amor's domain by instructing others in his own art of loving. Dante's relationship with Amore starkly contrasts with Ovid's relationship with Amor; instead of engaging in a power struggle, Dante and Amore work side by side.

In this context, it is clear that Ovid's Amor and Dante's Amore speak and laugh for very different reasons. Ovid's Amor usually laughs maliciously at Ovid, speaking to him in order to taunt (with the exception of the places in the *Remedia* where Amor gives Ovid advice, which

Dante develops further). Dante's god, meanwhile, laughs with Dante and for Dante, out of love and happiness; Amore speaks to Dante exclusively to guide him. Both gods take an active role in the love affairs of the poets, but while Ovid's god rejoices in his troubles, Dante's god is sympathetic: Amore cries; he appears when invoked; and he offers to give testimony of Dante's love to Beatrice.

The fact that Amore speaks to Dante in Latin has been a source of confusion for critics who have searched for reasons why Amore does not speak exclusively Italian.<sup>18</sup> These critics have overlooked the obvious: Amore is *expected* to speak in Latin, as he is, after all, a recast version of Ovid's Amor. In fact, Dante's decision to present Ovid's god of love speaking *Italian* is more exceptional than his decision to present the god speaking Latin, and fits neatly into Dante's general attempt to claim that the verses in the (Italian) vernacular are dignified and equal in quality to Latin verses (as Dante argues in chapter XXV).

There are two additional reasons for Amore speaking to Dante in Latin. First, the fact that Amore's words are in the same language as the Bible's word serves to elevate the importance of Amore's words. Secondly, outside the biblical context, Dante seems to acknowledge that Latin is a stronger, more powerful language than the vulgar (Italian) could ever be. Latin is capable of expressing with a higher intensity a feeling so powerful that it cannot be expressed in ordinary language. For example, in Dante's first vision of Beatrice, his initial reaction is to utter "Ecce deus fortior me . . ." (V.N. II, Behold a god more powerful than I . . .) in Latin.

BELLA MICHI, VIDEO, BELLA PARANTUR, AIT.

("IT'S WAR ON ME," HE CRIED, "I SEE IT'S WAR.")

In chapter XXV, Dante justifies his personification of Amore by noting the precedent in Ovid, specifically, by quoting the above passage from Ovid's *Remedia*. He cites the *Remedia* in particular, perhaps because it was considered a "safe" work in the Middle Ages since it purportedly represented a condemnation of physical love. In the *Remedia*, Ovid presents himself as enslaved by Amor, and tries to rid himself of the effects of his influence, yet with the consent and advice of Amor himself. It is in the *Remedia* that Amor, for the first time is presented as "Amor, qui pectora sanat" (healer of heartache) instead of wounder of the heart. Amor, by consenting, seems to confirm to Ovid that physical love is unacceptable. Ovid thus takes the negative, wounding aspect of Amor

presented in the *Ars* and turns it around by writing the *Remedia* as a sequel. Ovid playfully undoes his own prescriptions as a sign of literary virtuosity while Dante undoes Ovid's prescriptions as a sign of spiritual conviction. Dante, then, cites the *Remedia* in order to highlight Ovid's manipulation of the duality of Amor for religious ends.

Throughout the *Vita Nuova*, Dante presents specific references to the *Remedia*, in particular, describing the physical symptoms of love, including illness, and also offering remedies for love. In chapter XXXII Dante-protagonist uses an Ovidian remedy for love, namely, work (Rem. 135-58) when he tries to rid himself of his feelings of love by composing a sonnet for a lady who has died. In chapter XXXV, Dante makes use of a second Ovidian remedy, from the *Remedia* 485-6 and 521-2 where Ovid advises the lover, if shut out by one woman, to have another girl in reserve. Dante late in the narrative attempts to use this remedy but fails. Amore, meanwhile, much earlier in the narrative, suggests that Dante use this very same Ovidian remedy, not as a remedy, but as a strategy for winning Dante's love. Amore suggests to Dante-protagonist that it might be effective to make it *appear* that Dante has found another woman to love. (Here the adapted remedy is used not for physical pleasure but for appearance.) This strategy does not work with the first woman, and so Amore suggests that Dante try another woman (IX). The approach still fails, so Amore finally abandons the idea of a "screen lady" altogether. He suggests an Ovidian strategy for winning the lady from the *Ars* and *Amores*, namely, writing poetry to the woman. Amore commands Dante to compose a poem to her telling her how much he is under the power of Amore and how much he loves her. Amore encourages Dante to write poetry not for the Ovidian purpose of seduction (and indeed Dante's mistress does not give herself to Dante physically) but for the purpose of pleasing his woman, and, especially, to praise her.

The fact that Dante-protagonist uses two remedies for love (from the *Remedia*) which fail, and that Amore uses two strategies for winning love (one adapted from the *Remedia* and the other taken from the *Ars* and *Amores*) suggests that Dante-narrator ultimately does not want to cure his readers of secular love. Unlike most of his contemporaries, who consider secular love to be in conflict with divine love, Dante views secular love as a necessary first step toward the higher goal of divine love. While Dante's Amore does not condone physical love, as Ovid's Amor seems to in the *Remedia*, he does lead Dante-protagonist from physical love to spiritual love (of Beatrice). Amore accomplishes this

transformation in Dante by systematically teaching Dante how to love, just as Ovid's *praeceptor* teaches his students in the *Ars*. Dante may have seen the *Ars-Remedia* sequence as representing Ovid's growth in understanding of love, and in this light, may have appreciated Ovid's *Remedia* not for its "cure" for secular love, but for its implicit suggestion of a higher love. Since Dante incorporates this *Remedia* notion of a higher love into his own *Ars*, there is no need for a *Remedia*-like sequel; Dante's Amore teaches Dante the right kind of love the first time around.

Dante, then, uses the *Remedia* not to highlight the rejection of physical love, but to highlight its other unique aspect, the function of Amore as a benevolent guide. In the *Amores-Ars-Remedia* sequence, there is an interesting evolution in Ovid-protagonist's relationship with Amor. In the *Amores*, Ovid as lover and poet is controlled by Amor. Amor has unfair jurisdiction over poetry, chaining the feet of the poet. In the *Ars*, however, it is Ovid who controls Amor; Ovid proclaims at the outset that Amor will yield to him and then sets out with mock seriousness to write a treatise on the rules of love. In the *Remedia*, meanwhile, there is more of a balance of power between Ovid and Amor. Amor is still the god of love but he helps Ovid write a "how-to" book on remedies for love.

There is no such evolution in the Dante-Amore relationship. From the outset, Dante reads Ovid's Amor less as an all-powerful, controlling god and more as a teacher and friend, who engages in direct discourse with Dante in order to give him advice.<sup>19</sup> This direct discourse is important, as Dante indicates in chapter XXV and it is what distinguishes Ovid's Amor from other potential models such as the Amor in Arnault Daniel's *Canso* 16. While Arnault's Amor does speak, he does not engage in dialogue with Arnault.<sup>20</sup> Dante's Amore engages in dialogue with Dante just as Ovid's Amor engages in dialogue with him. This is important for Amore, as a guide to do, to clarify Dante's doubts.

The notion of Amor as an advisor is clearly present in the *Remedia*, though not consistently: while Amor at first sees Ovid's poem as a threat, he quickly changes his position, and actually offers help. Dante gives this process more structure, devising a real system under which Amore serves as a guide. Ovid's Amor addresses Ovid and gives him advice about how to *rid* himself of love. Dante's Amore, in contrast, addresses Dante with advice about how to *win* his love (Beatrice), ironically using Ovidian remedies for love toward that end. This is, again, a fusion of the *Ars* and the *Remedia*.

Finally, Dante may have selected not only a specific book of Ovid to highlight the vanity of physical love, but he may have selected this particular quote from Ovid's *Remedia* ("Bella michi, video, bella parantur, ait.," "It's war on me," he cried, "I see it's war.") to manipulate Ovid's own tension between lyric and epic for his own end. In Ovid's passage, "bella" evokes images of epic while "michi" evokes images of lyric. This passage is essentially a pseudo-epic evocation but it is presented in the context of first-person lyric narrative. Ovid's passage calls attention to his general assertion that he wishes to write epic, and is prevented from doing so by Amor. In the *Vita Nuova*, Dante's own use of Amore in a lyric narrative produces the same tension between epic and lyric. In Dante's case, the tension is even greater as the otherwise lyric narrative is broken by Dante's use of Amore as a rhetorical figure.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE "VERACE INTENDIMENTO" BEHIND DANTE'S FIGURE OF AMORE

In chapter XXV Dante asserts that he may personify Amore only if he also reveals a true meaning. This "true meaning" of Amore is revealed slowly. If the *Vita Nuova* is the story of Dante-protagonist's education in love, then Amore must be considered in relation to this education: Just as Beatrice reveals her smile to Dante (in *Paradiso*) in different stages according to his capacity to withstand its splendor, Amore in the *Vita Nuova* appears to Dante in different modes according to his ability to comprehend these appearances.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of Dante's "true meaning" of Amore in the *Vita Nuova* has been subject to a variety of interpretations. DeRobertis suggests that Amore is a metaphor for the Christian God. Singleton suggests that Amore is the Troubadour god of love and is ultimately rejected in chapter XXV. Shaw proposes that Amore is a mix of Cavalcantian Love (in the first two appearances) and Guinizellian Love (in the last two appearances), and ultimately represents "Dante's own holy love for Beatrice." Musa advances the idea that there are "Lesser Aspects" and "Greater Aspects" of Amore at different points during the narrative, and that they, too, are part of Dante's own love for Beatrice. Templer suggests that Amore is not a god at all, but rather a force, a platonic demon who mirrors Dante's own inner state and, changing constantly, disappears altogether after chapter XXV.<sup>23</sup> Marianne Shapiro similarly argues that Amore is invariably metonymic in his rhetorical status.

Since most of these interpretations are predicated on a dismissal of the figure of Amore, they do not really arrive at an understanding of the

“true meaning” behind Dante’s figure of Amor. This “true meaning” is most effectively understood when Amore is viewed in light of Dante’s own definition of Amore in chapter XXV as a corrected Ovidian Amor. Amore is not a constantly changing figure, but, rather, when personified according to Dante’s definition in chapter XXV, is a relatively consistent figure with a specific function. Amore does not represent the Christian god, but is instead an *agent* of the Christian god, much like Virgil in the *Commedia*. He, as Ovid’s *praeceptor*, teaches Dante how to love. He does not represent Dante’s love for Beatrice, but serves as Dante’s guide in Dante’s love for Beatrice.<sup>24</sup> He is not based on the Troubadour god of love, because he functions as a guide, rather than as all-powerful god. He is not a mix of Cavalcantian and Guinizellian aspects of Love; while he may exhibit some of Guinizelli’s ennobling aspects of love, nowhere does he represent the painful, destructive passion which characterizes Cavalcantian Love. He is not hostile to Dante; he is not against Dante but supports him. He does not represent contradictory aspects of Greater and Lesser Love because secular and sacred love, in Dante’s theology of love, are not in conflict; they work in tandem.

The figure of Amore in the *Vita Nuova* is central to both Dante’s poetic practice and Dante’s theology of love. In chapter XXV, Dante’s discussion of his use of Amore as a personification and as a figure of rhetoric is intended to show how Dante represents reality. The chapter appears to be a turning point, yet it is provocatively deceptive; the figure of Amore appears in the rest of the narrative even after his existence is denied by Dante. While Dante’s poetic practice is concerned with the representation of reality, Dante’s theology of love attempts to explain reality itself. Amore is essential to Dante’s theology of love because he leads Dante-protagonist from a physical to a spiritual love. Dante’s theology of love is tied to the question of his poetic practice; rather than writing directly about Christian love as Christian love, he arrives at Christian love through Ovidian eroticism. Dante does not reject Ovidian discourse; rather he remotivates the Ovidian conventions and constructs of falling in love in the context of Christian love. In doing so, he not only uses Ovid’s Amor, but also takes the Ovidian erotic rhetorical machinery of love (erections, parts of the female body, etc.), the playful and powerful reality of physical eroticism, and appropriates it in the discussion of divine love.

Amore shows Dante the road to spiritual love by affirming the worthiness of Beatrice for Dante’s love. Beatrice is the right woman to love because she will lead him to a higher form of love. Dante does

not need to deny the existence of Amore because Amore is not wrong, merely transformed; he is a symbol for love which we recognize from the tradition of love in Ovid, yet he is “corrected.” Unlike Ovid’s Amor who keeps Ovid chained to the physical love of a mistress, Dante’s Amore facilitates the journey upward to the love of God.

Though Dante specifically quotes the *Remedia* in chapter XXV, he also uses aspects of Ovid’s *Ars* and *Amores* throughout the *Vita Nuova*. Like Ovid’s Amor, Dante’s Amor completely directs Dante’s experience. The relationship between Dante’s Amore and Ovid’s Amor can be extended to describe a broader relationship between Ovid’s *Ars* and Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. Specifically, the *Vita Nuova* is presented as a kind of *Ars* in which Dante, as student, is instructed by his teacher, Amore, how to love.

While in Ovid’s *Ars* the teaching is done by the *praeceptor*, in the *Vita Nuova*, Dante combines Ovid’s Amor and Ovid’s *praeceptor* into one character: Amore. The result of this fusion is that Dante’s Amore both initiates Dante’s love experience (as Ovid’s Amor does for Ovid), and also guides Dante in that experience (as Ovid’s *praeceptor* does for Roman youth). Even though Dante’s Amore does not give his student a list of rules to follow (as Ovid’s *praeceptor* does for young Romans), he nevertheless effectively provides rules by directing Dante’s actions regarding his love. While Ovid’s *praeceptor* parodies an art of love, Dante’s *praeceptor* presents a serious art of love. Dante has inverted the Ovidian notion of teaching, but retained the idea of instruction in the ways of love.

The interpretation of the *Vita Nuova* as a kind of treatise on the art of love has already been proposed by critics in a different context. These critics, Piconi, Contini and Betti, have suggested that the *Vita Nuova* is a rewritten version of Andreas Capellanus’s *De Amore*.<sup>25</sup> Their suggestion is engaging, since Capellanus’s *De Amore* is itself a kind of rewritten *Ars*. The problem arises, however, in Capellanus’s characters of the *praeceptor* and Amor; they are two different figures. More direct parallels, in fact, are to be found between the *Vita Nuova* and Ovid’s *Ars* and *Remedia*.

In the *Ars-Remedia* sequence, Ovid plays with the notion of Amor as teacher and student. While in the prologue to the *Ars* Ovid claims that he is the *praeceptor* who teaches Amor the rules of love (“ego sum *praeceptor* Amoris” (v. 17)). Only the *Remedia*, the sequel to the *Ars*, presents the notion of Amore as a teacher and guide who actively gives Ovid advice. Ovid is *praeceptor*, but he is taught by Amor.

While Ovid suggested that Amor may be a *praeceptor*, medieval authors adapting his works portrayed Amor as a *praeceptor*. Frequently in



medieval adaptations of Ovid's rules of love, we see an important reversal of student-teacher roles. In the *Carmina burana* 105, for example, Amor speaks of Ovid as the one in need of instruction in Amor's rules of love: "Artes amatorie iam non instruuntur la Nasone tradite" 7.1-2 (vv. 30-1) and "Naso meis artibus feliciter instructus" 8.1 (v. 34). An even more explicit reversal of Amor's and Ovid's roles as student and teacher may be found in Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* where Amor claims that he was Ovid's *praeceptor*:

Si leyeres Ovidio, el que fue mi criado, len e'l fallaras fablas  
 que l'oeve  
 you mostrado.

(vv. 429-30. If you would read Ovid who was an apprentice of mine, you will find in his work the fables which I taught him, with many good examples for a lover: Pamphilus and Ovid both learned from me.)<sup>26</sup>

In this light, it does not seem inappropriate that Amore would be a teacher to Dante.

Dante's combination of Ovid's *praeceptor* with Ovid's Amor highlights an interesting inversion of the Ovidian narrative registers and basis of authority. In the *Ars*, Ovid-author as *praeceptor* teaches the reader, based on his own personal experience as lover, and addresses him in the first and second person. Amor addresses the *praeceptor* in the second person. In the Dantean configuration, the *praeceptor* is in the second person voice, and is a fictional character, Amore, who teaches Dante-protagonist. The voice of Dante *autor* is in the first person, but it is more a narrator voice; he talks to the reader about each poem more than how to love, and how to find God. The didactic dimension is also in the first person, in the voice of Amore. Dante may have combined Ovid's Amor and *praeceptor* as a guide in order to lend authority to Amore's teaching; in the *Ars* the basis of authority is experience of the *praeceptor*; in the *Amores*, the basis of authority is divine: Amor, who dictates to Ovid.

While Ovid's Amor speaks in the *Amores*, Ovid speaks more about Amor and to him; in the *Ars* Ovid's *praeceptor* speaks only to the student, and the student does not speak back. Dante's Amore speaks only to Dante which is clearly delineated in Dante's mimesis in chapter III where the scene is narrated completely in the third person, with the

exception of Amore's remarks to Dante protagonist in the first and second person. Dante protagonist, meanwhile, rarely addresses Amore. Eventually Dante-narrator expresses this with an interesting mix of figurative and figural metaphors. He uses a personified character, Amore, to lead Dante not to a figurative death as Ovid's Amor leads Ovid, but to a figural death. Ovid presents the union as having really happened; Dante presents the union as having happened in a dream vision.

Amore speaks Italian more frequently than he speaks Latin: he speaks Italian in 8 chapters (prose and poetry) and he speaks Latin in 3 chapters (prose only). From chapter XII onward there is a clear change in Amore's role. Amore means to appear less as a god, and more as a guide. Specifically, his behavior is closer to that of Ovid's *praeceptor* than to that of Ovid's Amor in that he no longer articulates profound phrases in Latin, but instead actively offers Dante advice on how to win Beatrice. This advice is offered in Italian, not in Latin. Amore changes his role of necessity. Dante indicates at various points in the narrative that he does not understand completely Amore's words. Amore's reaction in chapter XII is two-fold: First, he no longer speaks to Dante in an artificial language (Latin) but in one more directly comprehended by Dante (Italian). Second, Amore, by telling Dante not to ask more than is useful to know, warns him that he will not be able to understand everything yet and so must be patient. This is similar to Beatrice's statement that she must temper her appearance according to Dante's understanding; the teaching must be gradual.

Thus it would appear that when Amore speaks Italian he speaks to give Dante advice, playing the role of Ovid's *praeceptor*. When he speaks Latin, he seems to reveal Christian truths, assuming more the role of a corrected, Christianized god.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the Latin statements are meant to seem both solemn and somewhat obscure (like a prophecy). The fact that Amore speaks Latin exclusively in the prose and that he speaks biblical Latin rather than Ovidian Latin is significant. The prose, according to Dante, reveals the true meaning of the poetry; his "divisioni" follow the medieval scholastic exegetical practice of dividing and explaining the text in terms of Christian truth. Dante-glossator tries to associate Amore with the Christian God, just as the medieval commentators try to reread Ovid in light of Christian truth. In this association of Amore with the Christian god, Dante effectively suggests that Amore as a figure of rhetoric complements rather than conflicts with Dante's theology of love.

## CONCLUSION

In chapter XXV Dante presents a clear distinction between what love is (a psychological force out of the medieval learned tradition) and how he chooses to represent love (as a personification figure out of the Latin elegaic tradition). Chapter XXV seems to be a turning point, yet it is deceptive; the figure of Amore appears in the rest of the narrative even after his existence is denied by Dante. This is because the figure of Amore is central to both Dante's poetic practice and Dante's theology of love. Dante's discussion of his use of Amore as a personification is intended to show how Dante represents reality. Dante's poetic practice treats the representation of reality, while his theology of love treats reality itself. The figure of Amore is crucial to Dante's theology of love because he leads Dante-protagonist from a physical to a spiritual love. Dante's theology of love is related to his poetic practice in that Dante arrives at Christian love through Ovidian eroticism rather than writing directly about Christian love as Christian love. Instead of rejecting the Ovidian conventions of falling in love, Dante remotivates them in the context of Christian love.

Dante "corrects" Ovid's Amor in the context of Christian truth, and fuses him with Ovid's *praeceptor* to be a guide not to erotic but to spiritual love. Dante's Amore, as a corrected Ovidian Amor, is not Ovid's whimsical, irresponsible "puer," but rather a serious, responsible adult. Amore is no longer associated with Folly, but instead, with Reason. Dante's Amore is also a corrected Ovidian *praeceptor*; he teaches spiritual love instead of physical love, using Ovidian precepts of love. In this way, Dante's Amore works for the Christian god, not against him. Dante does not need to reject Ovid's Amor because, unlike many medieval authors, Dante's conception of divine love does not require the rejection of physical love. Dante not only presents a major character from Ovid's minor works, but he also remotivates the Ovidian constructs of falling in love within a spiritual framework, using the Ovidian rhetorical machinery of physical love to describe spiritual love for a woman.

## Notes

1. Harrison suggests that the chapter is highly inconsistent with the rest of the *Vita Nuova*, in that with the exception of the decomposition of the god

of love, “nowhere does Dante engage in the systematic divestment of figurative language which he recommends.” I do not agree that Dante succeeds in decomposing the god of love and I do not believe this chapter is a digression. See Robert Harrison. *The Body of Beatrice*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. 62.

2. These four appearances of Amor occur in chapters III, IX, XII and XXIV.

3. Musa, for example, comments “Anyone familiar with the *Vita Nuova*, who is interested in the significance of the figure of Love, knows that in this chapter he will find no clue to the proper interpretation of this mysterious figure.” See Mark Musa, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973, p. 108.

4. Dante’s inconsistency in the text with regard to this figure is not unusual. He is equally as inconsistent in his presentation of many tropes and in the narrative style of the text itself.

5. The metaphor of Love painted in the face of Beatrice in chapter XIX, for example, may have its roots in the Sicilian metaphor of the lady painted in the lover’s heart, while the figure of Amore and the image of the trembling of Dante’s heart associated with Amore’s presence in chapter XXIV may have its roots in the poetry of the stilnovists. See Moleta, V., “‘Voi le vedete amor pinto nel viso’ (V.N., XIX, 12),: Prehistory of a Metaphor,” *La Gloriosa Donna de la Mente: A commentary on the Vita Nuova*. Ed V. Moleta. Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1992, pp. 77-95 and see Marti, M., “‘L’una appresso de l’altra meraviglia’ (V.N., XXIV, 8): Stilnovo, Guido, Dante nell’ipostasi Vita novistica,” *La Gloriosa Donna de la Mente: A Commentary on the Vita Nuova*. A cura di V. Moleta. Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1992, pp. 141-159.

6. Margherita Templer, for example, suggests that in the second vision where Amor appears in Dante’s sleep, the language of apparition of Philosophy is similar to that in Boethius’s *Philosophiae Consolatio*. Templer, M., “Amore e le visioni nella *Vita Nuova*.” *Dante Studies* XCII (1974): 19-33.

7. It is known that Dante was familiar with both major and minor Ovid through his study of Ovid in the *florilegia*, through the availability of allegorized commentaries and unadulterated versions of Ovid’s works in the vulgar, and through the circulation of Ovid’s original texts in Latin. The preponderance of modern Dantists, however, argue that Dante used Ovid’s original text of the *Metamorphoses*, based on textual similarities between Ovid’s original works and Dante’s text. In my study of Dante’s use of minor Ovid, I also found that there were many textual similarities between Ovid’s original and Dante’s text. For this reason, we will focus on Ovid’s original text.

8. All Latin quotations of Ovid are taken from the following editions: Ovid. *Amores, Ars Amatoria, Remedia Amoris*. Ed. E.J. Kenney. Oxford: Oxford Classical Texts, 1961.
- . *Metamorphoses*. Ed. Loeb Classical Library, vol.II. Ed G.P. Goold. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- English translations of quotations of Ovid come from:
- . *The Art of Love*. Translation by R. Humphries. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957.
- . *Metamorphoses*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955.
- . *The Love Poems*. Translated by A.D. Melville. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990.
- . *Metamorphoses*: Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990.

As the English translations vary widely, I have tried to use the one closest to the original Latin in each individual passage. The particular translation used is indicated for each passage. This first translation is from the Humphries translation.

9. All Italian quotes from the *Vita Nuova* are from: Dante Alighieri. *Vita Nuova*. Ed. D. DeRobertis. Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1984. All English translations are from: Reynolds, Barbara. *La Vita Nuova: Poems of Youth*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

10. Translation is from the Melville edition.
11. Translation is from the Humphries edition.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Hollander concludes that Dante treats Beatrice as historically true and Amor as not historically true.
15. Translation is from the Humphries edition, with the exception of the last clause which is my own.
16. Hollander claims that since Amor appears only in Dante's sleep or imagination (except in the poem of chapter IV) he is not an "actual character," that is, he is not a character distinct from Dante. By Dante's own definition of the character of Amore, as a personification alla Ovid, who has the form of a man, who comes and goes, and speaks, Amor is indeed a character, one who is very similar to Ovid's character in his appearances.
17. Dante's association of Amor with Reason is a correction of *Amores* 1.2.32-6. where Love's allies are Folly, Illusion, and Madness. In chapter II Dante notes that it is Beatrice's nobility that keeps Amor within the bounds of Reason and in chapters IV and XV he says that Amor is counseled by Reason.
18. Singleton has suggested, for example, that Latin is used in solemn

utterances because of its superiority to Italian implies an aloofness of Amore from Dante. This interpretation is hard to accept for two reasons: first, Amore addresses Dante with affection, unlikely if he meant to be aloof; second, this interchange in Latin is exclusive to Dante and Amore, and thus, to men, to educated poets. Thus the use of Latin implies not an aloofness of Amore from Dante but rather an affinity between Amore and Dante.

19. The Troubadours and the *dolce stil novo* poets tended to read Ovid's Amor more as an all-powerful controlling god. A key aspect of the Troubadours version of Amor which reinforces the all-powerful god idea is his court. Dante omits this; in the *Vita Nuova* Amor always appears alone.

20. See Pignatelli. "*La Vita Nuova*" di Dante. Padova: 1949, p. 27; and Musa, 186.

21. Perhaps to underscore the lyric nature of the text, Dante echoes specific language of elegaic poetry in the second chapter of the *Vita Nuova* where he describes his first encounter with Amore. When Dante is nine years old, he sees Beatrice and becomes enraptured. As a result of this encounter, he recognizes that henceforth the god of love would rule over his soul, instructing him in what to do and where to go. Dante relates his reaction to this encounter in three Latin phrases, which both echo Ovid and underline the significance of Amore to Dante. The initial phrase is "Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi." (Behold a god more powerful than I who comes to dominate me.) In the second phrase, he suggests that this god may bring him blessing: "Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra." (Now your source of blessedness has appeared.) In the third phrase, he laments that he will be held back because of the presence of this god: "Heu miser! quia frequenter impeditus ero deinceps." (Woe is me! For I shall often be impeded from now on.)

In these phrases, it is unclear whether the god (and the source of joy) is Amore or Beatrice. Dante deliberately confuses syntax; he introduces first Beatrice, then Amore, and relates his reactions to both of them at the same time. The ambiguity between Amor and the mistress is consistent with classical elegy. As early as in the works of Catullus the woman is depicted as a divinity, and both Amor and the mistress are seen as dominating, controlling figures. Here, however, several pieces of evidence suggest that Dante specifically describes Amore, rather than Beatrice. First, Dante's use of the masculine "deus" indicates Amore rather than Beatrice as the subject of the sentence. Second, the suggestion of Amore's role as a god and as a dominating figure returns in chapter III, where Amore says that he is Dante's "dominus." The suggestion of blessedness bestowed on Dante by Amore returns in chapter XXIV when Amore says to Dante, "Pensa di benedicere lo di' che io ti presi." (Note that this is a correction

of Ovid's attitude toward Amor; while Ovid resents Amor's reign, Dante suggests that Amore's reign may be a blessing.)

The fact that Dante's third phrase strongly echoes the language used in Ovid's *Amores* I.1 (where Ovid specifically encounters first Amor and then his lady) provides further evidence in support of the contention that Dante refers to Amore, not Beatrice. "Heu miser" is the quintessential elegiac term of self-definition of the elegiac lover, which serves to mark the moment of contact with Love's power. For example in the opening poem of his *Elegiae*, Propertius describes himself as "miserum me!" Meanwhile Ovid, in the opening to the *Amores*, exclaims "me miserum!" Furthermore, "impeditus" is an unusual word for Dante to use in his third phrase. It is possible that Dante uses this word to set off an echo of "pede" and the play on feet in the *Amores* I.1. Though "impeditus" is not specifically an elegiac word, the idea of being constrained is an elegiac idea; words such as "vinctus" and "domare" are common in the elegiac tradition. Dante does not say how he will be impeded. In fact, Dante offers no evidence that he is impeded by Amore, as Ovid is by Amor, but rather he is impeded merely by the fact that the road on which he journeys is rough. In fact, Amore helps Dante, the opposite of impeding him.

22. Shaw, J.E.. *Essays on the Vita Nuova*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929.

23. Templer, Margherita de Bonfils. *Itinerario di Amore: Dialettica di Amore e Morte nella Vita Nuova*. University of North Carolina Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973. See also, "Amore e le visioni nella *Vita Nuova*." *Dante Studies* XCII (1974): 19-33.

24. Margherita de Bonfils Templer also suggests that Amor acts as a guide to a higher love, but deliberately downplays the religious side of this transcendence. See Templer 113.

25. Betti, for example, points out a numerical correspondance between the poetic components of the *Vita Nuova* and the 31 rules of Amor at the end of Andreas' second book. See Picone, M. *Vita Nuova e la tradizione romanza*. Padova: Liviana, 1979.

26. The English translation is from Mignani, R. *The Book of Good Love*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970, p. 112.

27. It is also interesting to note that up to and including chapter XIII, all Latin which is used either directly concerns Amor or is spoken by Amor, while the little Latin that follows chapter XIII refers to the Christian God.